

# The World of American Communism: Ups and Downs 1918–1945<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The history of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and related questions have been the subject of research for decades. Indeed, it remains a topic of heated debate among scholars, and their findings in terms of the activities of the CPUSA itself, its sympathisers, and those who secretly spied for the Soviet Union, are still being regularly discussed and considered. Newly available sources and modern methodology have cast light on many aspects of the story that were previously unknown. Generally speaking, there are two main approaches to the theme: the first is a top-down perspective, represented by historians from the so-called traditionalist school such as Theodor Draper, and later Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Ronald Radost; while the second, from the bottom-up has been adopted by the younger generation of revisionist historians, such as Maurice Isserman and Mark Naison. To put it simply, as far as the former is concerned, American Communists were nothing more than unscrupulous dogmatic pawns of the Soviet Union. For the latter, on the other hand, communist activists and fellow-travellers were people who often saw the USSR as the great and only hope for the human race.<sup>2</sup> The issue is complex.

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<sup>2</sup> K. A. CUORDILEONE, *The Torment of Secrecy: Reckoning with American Communism and Anticommunism after Venona*, in: *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 35, Is. 4, 2011, pp. 623, 634.

### **The Origins and the First Decade of the American Communist Movement**

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia had a profound impact on left-wing American radicals. Even though their knowledge of what was happening on the ground, and indeed of the conditions prevailing in the Russian Empire in general, was rather sketchy, what they did realise was that a tiny political party had managed to take control of a country as vast as Russia.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, there was hardly a left-leaning radical in the United States who did not wholeheartedly support the Bolshevik Revolution. American intellectuals considered the Bolshevik leaders to be not only endowed with a will of iron but as men of ideas who brought political hope to the world. Articles, books and pamphlets enthusiastically portraying the events on the other side of the globe struck a responsive chord in the hearts of revolutionaries resident in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The most famous was John Reed's vivid account, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, which was first published in 1919.<sup>5</sup> Reed was an eyewitness to what happened in St. Petersburg in 1917 and believed that the unfolding events provided the “*steam that [powered] the turbines of change*” of the universe.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that Lenin himself wrote a short introduction to the Russian edition of the book and recommended it to workers worldwide.<sup>7</sup> To a certain extent, it can be argued that Reed and his fellow impassioned writers who extolled the Bolshevik Revolution laid the foundations for the interconnectedness between the Russian and American communist worlds.

The American communist movement was born in the tense and troubled period which followed the end of the First World War. Given the immigrant character of the United States at the time, the American situation was unique in comparison with other English-speaking countries. From the outset, the

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<sup>3</sup> H. KLEHR – J. E. HAYNES, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself*, New York 1992, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> I. HOWE – L. COSER, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History 1919–1957*, Boston 1957, pp. 25–26.

<sup>5</sup> For example J. REED, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, London 2007.

<sup>6</sup> D. W. LEHMAN, *John Reed and the Writing of Revolution*, Athens, OH 2001, pp. 172–173.

<sup>7</sup> A. BROWN, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, London 2010, p. 95.

American communist movement echoed developments in Soviet Russia, and later the Soviet Union, and its members were, by and large, unable to distinguish between actual conditions in the United States and the theoretical and practical requirements placed upon them from the headquarters of the new communist state in Moscow.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the very formation of the American Communist Party proved a challenge. Differences among the various factions that made up the left were not settled on the movement's inception and resolute efforts would be undertaken by representatives of the Soviet Union to heal the divisions. In fact, two communist parties came into being in the United States in 1919, namely the Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party. Neither, however, was very large in terms of membership.<sup>9</sup> Each claimed to be a truer adherent to Leninism than its rival and hoped to gain support from Moscow, or, more precisely, the Comintern, established the very same year.<sup>10</sup>

The Communist Party of America, led by Charles E. Ruthenberg, was based almost exclusively on foreign-language federations. Those were (in terms of numbers) the Russian, Finnish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, South Slavic, Polish, Latvian, Jewish-Yiddish-speaking, Hungarian, German and Estonian. By the end of 1919, the party was composed of approximately 24,000 dues-paying supporters of whom, in fact, only about 1,900 formed the English-speaking cohort. The Communist Labor Party, on the other hand, had a much larger proportion of native-born and English-speaking members. Its main proponent was none other than John Reed, followed by Jay Lovestone.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that during the 1920s, the bulk of American communists were immigrant blue-collar workers. The result was that the movement came to be associated with foreigners in its formative years and this image persisted in the public mind even in the later period when it was still viewed by many

<sup>8</sup> R. SERVICE, *Comrades: Communism, A World History*, London 2007, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> KLEHR – HAYNES, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> HOWE – COSER, pp. 43–44.

<sup>11</sup> N. GLAZER, *The Social Basis of American Communism*, New York 1961, p. 39; KLEHR – HAYNES, p. 25.

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as alien, something imported to the United States from Europe.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, ever since the 1870s, foreign radicals were often regarded by native-born Americans as a threat to what was believed to be the national destiny of the United States. This might account for the fact that many Americans later found it very difficult to accept that Alger Hiss, the exposed secret Communist and Soviet spy, actually came from upper-class, WASP American stock.<sup>13</sup>

The turbulence that followed on the home front as a result of increased radicalism in the wake of the First World War was widespread. The years 1919 and 1920 were marked by a series of bombings, in which the Communists had neither hand, act, nor part, and large-scale strikes, in which their role was minimal. Nevertheless, these events aroused extensive public disquiet, amounting to panic in some quarters, and became identified as the Red Scare. The Federal Attorney-General, Mitchel Palmer, launched a series of attacks known as the Palmer Raids against members of the communist movement and its sympathisers who were taken into custody and in many cases deported as alien radicals.<sup>14</sup> The agents conducting the swoops paid scant regard to civil liberties, frequently failed to obtain search warrants, held the arrested incommunicado, and subjected them to various forms of abuse.<sup>15</sup> The Red Scare drove the divided American communist movement underground. Already at this stage the Comintern, and its designated American Agency, had begun to exert pressure on the American Communists. Firstly, the need for a united movement was stressed, and secondly the movement was to operate openly wherever possible. Even though neither demand was easy to fulfil, American Communists sought to obey the instructions received from Moscow, viewing themselves as an integral part of a worldwide movement led by the

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<sup>12</sup> N. FISCHER, *The Founders of American Anti-Communism*, in: *American Communist History*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2006, p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> H. KLEHR, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite*, Stanford 1978, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> T. MORGAN, *Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth Century America*, New York 2003, pp. 79–80.

<sup>15</sup> KLEHR – HAYNES, p. 28.

Russian revolution experts. However, the American movement suffered from poor organization and an inexperienced leadership in its formative years.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, the CPUSA was faced with a chronic shortage of recruits and a high turnover rate in membership. It should be stressed that it was still an organization controlled mainly by immigrants and language federations. Despite the fact that the Bolshevization campaign, under directives from Moscow, aimed at destroying the language federations, it took more than a decade to change the immigrant character of the party.<sup>17</sup> In 1923, for example, English-speakers (including foreign-born English-speakers) represented only 7.8% of members. In general, it should be noted that membership rose when party policy turned to mass politics and fell when it vehemently advocated revolution. At the same time, membership grew during a downturn in the country's economy and, in like manner, the party saw a corresponding decline in numbers in times of prosperity when job prospects improved. It should also be noted that already in the 1920s the CPUSA had begun to attract a large group of sympathisers who for one reason or another never actually joined the party, but nonetheless subscribed and regularly read communist newspapers and periodicals or joined various front organizations. In 1926, for instance, the CPUSA published 27 journals in 19 languages with a total circulation of 177,000.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Heyday of American Communism**

The heyday of American communism came in the 1930s, especially the latter half when the CPUSA abandoned its ultra-leftist rhetoric. The relative strength of the Communists was the result of both domestic and international circumstances. The Soviet Union was admired by many in the West during this "decade of engagement", its prestige considerably enhanced by the seeming ability of the country's planned economy to avoid the instability

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<sup>16</sup> HOWE – COSER, pp. 71–72, 89–91.

<sup>17</sup> KLEHR, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> KLEHR – HAYNES, pp. 52–53.

and the economic hardship of the Depression years and for its advocacy of collective security against fascism, expressed among other things in the help offered the Republican government during the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, one could go so far as to state that Western intellectuals had virtually fallen in love with the idea of the Plan and those of them who visited the Soviet Union saw most often a blend of their own utopian preconceptions. In addition, following instructions from the 1935 Comintern Congress, the CPUSA moderated its political position and was ready to ally itself with other so-called progressive forces in a Popular Front. For this reason, American Communists supported their erstwhile ideological foe President Roosevelt and his New Deal policy. The new atmosphere encouraged many intelligent and committed men and women in the United States and elsewhere who were eager to contribute to the success of socialism and of the anti-Fascist forces to openly enrol in the party or, if this was deemed inappropriate, to secretly help the Soviet cause in other ways, or indeed to join one or more of its front organizations.<sup>19</sup> The most considerable achievement of this Popular Front period was the success of the Committee of Industrial Organization (CIO).<sup>20</sup>

The CPUSA achieved a significant albeit limited success in regions such as the states of New York, California, Washington, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Oregon, and Illinois.<sup>21</sup> Large concentrations of party members were resident in New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and San Francisco. In fact, 75% of the entire CP membership was located in these cities.<sup>22</sup> The most sizeable proportion of the party, however, was based in the New York area. In 1934, New York made up only 22.5% of CPUSA membership; four years later it was 47% and, according to FBI data, New York accounted for 51%

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<sup>19</sup> M. ISSERMAN, *Which Side Were You on?: The American Communist Party during the Second World War*, Middletown – Connecticut 1982, pp. ix, 3; D. PRIESTLAND, *The Red Flag: Communism and the Making of Modern World*, London 2010, pp. 195–196.

<sup>20</sup> HOWE – COSER, p. 368.

<sup>21</sup> H. KLEHR, *The Communist Experience in America: A Political and Social History*, New Brunswick – London 2010, p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> KLEHR – HAYNES, p. 74.

of the party faithful in 1951.<sup>23</sup> The CPUSA did its utmost to attract as many new followers as possible in the period and several recruitment drives were launched to this end. One such was a campaign to “Americanise” the party and thereby draw in more English-speakers. Indeed, throughout the 1930s, CPUSA membership rose steadily. Harvey Klehr, for instance, has demonstrated that card-carrying members increased from 7,500 in 1930 to 55,000 eight years later. It could be argued that the rise in appeal was a direct result of the Popular Front strategy, which enabled the movement to identify itself with what could be called core American values. The slogan “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism” propagated by Earl Browder, General Secretary of the Party, may also have played a role.<sup>24</sup> In 1934, the native-born element constituted only some 34%; however, the proportion of foreign-born had already begun to decline in comparison and by 1936 the bulk of the members were native-born. Indeed, in 1938, the absolute majority of CPUSA members was born in the United States.<sup>25</sup> It should be borne in mind that though the Communists made up only a very small segment of the American population, they were a highly concentrated minority. They lived in the same neighbourhoods, spent a lot of their spare time together, and their children were friends.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, a paradox emerges with respect to membership in the 1930s. Due to its predominantly immigrant make-up, the CPUSA had a truly proletarian character in the 1920s. However, with the growing number of native stock among its ranks, the party became more middle-class in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> It is likewise noteworthy that by the end of the 1920s, there was a strong Jewish influence in the CPUSA and the party was very successful in attracting American-born Jews, often the second generation of immigrants, to the fold, a pattern that would continue the following decade. In fact, people

<sup>23</sup> GLAZER, p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> KLEHR – HAYNES, p. 23; D. BELL, *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, Princeton 1973, p. 146.

<sup>25</sup> GLAZER, pp. 110, 114.

<sup>26</sup> ISSERMAN, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> GLAZER, pp. 110, 114.



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of Jewish origin, often with a much higher level of education than their non-Jewish counterparts, were the only native-born group into which the CPUSA made substantial recruiting inroads, and this, in turn, contributed to the trend of making the party increasingly middle-class. In addition, foreign-born Jews also had advantages for the party. Primarily, they had a greater ability to assimilate themselves into both the American communist movement and the American way of life than other foreign-born members, who often found themselves isolated in their ethnic communities. Moreover, they frequently spoke and wrote English, were better educated than other foreign-born nationals, and were more likely to get a white-collar job.<sup>28</sup> It should also be mentioned that Jewish Communists were very active both in the party and in affiliated organizations, such as the Young Communist League, and took major leadership roles.<sup>29</sup>

Another campaign run by the CPUSA in the 1930s was designed to attract black Americans and to develop their revolutionary potential. The Soviet Union saw the vexed question of racial inequality in the United States as an important weapon in the struggle against capitalism and came up with its own racial solution in 1928. Not having understood the actual nature of the problem, Soviet, and consequently American, Communists called for self-determination for African Americans around the so-called Black Belt in the South of the United States with the ultimate goal of establishing a “Negro Soviet Republic”.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, this did not engender any very positive response among the African American community themselves. Indeed such a programme would in fact merely confirm the existing racial segregation. What the campaign did achieve, however, was to highlight the CPUSA’s role in championing both at home and abroad the injustices African Americans

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<sup>28</sup> KLEHR, *Communist Cadre*, pp. 35, 39, 40, and 43; J. HOLMES, *American Jewish Communism and Garment Unionism in the 1920s*, in: *American Communist History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2007, pp. 171–173.

<sup>29</sup> KLEHR – HAYNES, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> B. KEYS, *An African-American Worker in Stalin’s Soviet Union: Race and the Soviet Experiment in International Perspective*, in: *The Historian*, Vol. 71, Is. 1, 2009, p. 35.



suffered in the United States. The party mobilised its resources and took a determined stand against racial discrimination and injustice and also sponsored local anti-lynching rallies.<sup>31</sup> This policy began in its own ranks, when a man by the name of August Yokinen was expelled from the party for being impolite to African Americans who attended a dance in a communist-affiliated club.<sup>32</sup> The party likewise led a successful international drive to save the so-called Scottsboro Boys from legal lynching in Alabama where they had been falsely accused and convicted of raping two white women. Many other such campaigns followed and this deepened respect and support for the CPUSA among African Americans.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned earlier, not everyone who supported the communist movement had to be a member of the CPUSA, the contrary was indeed the case. The so-called Popular Front phase of international communism that followed the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Comintern in 1935 relied on various front organizations to advance the cause. In the case of the United States, they included the American League against War and Fascism, the American Youth Congress, the League of American Writers, the National Negro Congress, and the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. This created a special “front psychology” based on a sense of political urgency, a spirit of fraternity, and a foreboding about the rise of Fascism. The Communists were doing their level best to build bridges with a broad-spectrum of sympathisers, fellow-travellers, and non-Communist progressives and liberals.<sup>34</sup> The left-leaning community in the Hollywood motion-picture industry, for instance, was very active. Its members attended front-organization meetings, wrote pamphlets, collected money and rallied around the banners of the unjustly arrested.<sup>35</sup> It is

<sup>31</sup> Ch. H. MARTIN, *The International Labor Defense and Black America*, in: Labor History, Vol. 26, Spring 1985, p. 170.

<sup>32</sup> GLAZER, p. 172.

<sup>33</sup> M. C. DAWSON, *Blacks In and Out of the Left*, Cambridge, MA – London 2013, pp. 1–3. See also M. L. ROWAN, *African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928–1937*, Nebraska 2012, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> HOWE – COSER, p. 332.

<sup>35</sup> P. MCGILLIGAN – P. BUHLE, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist*,

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noteworthy that between 1935 and 1939, literally millions of Americans from New York to Hollywood joined pro-Soviet organizations and, in one way or another, supported various campaigns directed by the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, more than 3,000 Americans, among whom there was a large proportion of Communists, travelled to Spain to enlist as volunteers in the International Brigades and aid in the Republican struggle against General Franco. Half of them never returned. In fact, there was hardly a communist family in the United States that did not have a relative or friend on the casualty lists.<sup>37</sup> It should also be mentioned that Communists and communist sympathisers and fellow-travellers turned a blind eye to the terror that was taking place in Stalin's Soviet Union. Of course, it is questionable whether they really believed that "*the Soviet people [were] building a great, new, free society [...] and those who [were] trying to stop this progress by treason and assassination, to betray the Soviet people into the hands of the fascist barbarians, [had to] expect to pay the price of their treachery when caught,*" or "*the stronger and more prosperous [the USSR] became, the more savage [were] the attacks of its enemies.*"<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, according to some, mistakes could occur on the way to world revolution and should not ruin the "greater good of socialism".

### **A Wrong Bet in the Gamble**

The CPUSA continued to follow instructions from the Comintern through the late 1930s. After 1935, Communism had, remarkably, become a rather respectable tenet in the United States; in fact, the party was enjoying its greatest success to date with an ever-expanding membership base. Communists

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New York 1999, p. xv.

<sup>36</sup> W. L. O'NEILL, *A Better World: Stalinism and the American Intellectuals*, New Brunswick – London 1990, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> ISSERMAN, pp. 27–28.

<sup>38</sup> E. YAROSLAVSKY, *The Meaning of the Soviet Trials, Including the Official Text of the Indictment of the Bukharin-Trotskyite Bloc*, with the Introduction by W. Z. Foster, New York 1938, p. 2. *The Plot against the Soviet Union and World Peace*, Moscow 1938, p. 4.

and their supporters strove hard to expose the danger of Fascism and of Nazi Germany both on the domestic and international plane and likewise highlighted what they hailed as the “brave stance of the Soviet Union”. On top of that, the CPUSA claimed that it had inherited the mantle of such revered American figures as Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine and Abraham Lincoln. It also clearly demonstrated its ability to cooperate with a wide range of organisations, from the trade union movement to churches and civil rights groups.<sup>39</sup> The sudden radical departure from the previous Soviet course manifest in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 23 August 1939, however, and in the Soviet attack on Poland three weeks later, unambiguously showed the CPUSA’s willingness to sacrifice everything it had achieved on the American front for the sake of the USSR. Communist parties all over the world carefully awaited Soviet guidelines on how to explain the sudden about-turn in policy and offer an alternative interpretation of the war that had just broken out.

Earl Browder, the leader of the American communist movement, accepted the view that Germany and the West were alone responsible for the situation. Furthermore, he described the Nazi-Soviet Pact as nothing other than Stalin’s “master stroke” for peace. Overnight, anti-Fascist slogans were replaced by anti-imperialist ones and the party adopted an anti-British and anti-French posture. The Soviet occupation of “its” part of Poland was depicted as a “sacred duty” of the Soviet “liberators” who freed the national minorities in Eastern Poland from “*the tyrannical rule of the greedy landlords and the corrupt nobility,*” and “*scored another triumph for human freedom*”.<sup>40</sup> The American Jewish communist press went even further, with *Freiheit*, the Yiddish-language newspaper, maintaining that the Soviet occupation of Poland was actually good news for the Jews. Readers were informed that even though two million Jews had fallen under Hitler’s heel, another million were “saved” by the Soviets.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the main message propagated by the

<sup>39</sup> PRIESTLAND, p. 192.

<sup>40</sup> ISSERMAN, pp. 43, 47; HOWE – COSER, p. 387.

<sup>41</sup> HOWE – COSER, p. 402.

CPUSA during this period was that the United States had to stay out of the war. For this reason, the FDR Administration found itself under attack from the American Communists who also pursued an aggressive trade union policy with calls for strikes. The CPUSA tried to minimise the number of defectors in the fallout from its attitude to political events in Europe and, in the case of party membership at least, it was generally successful. Indeed, the majority of American Communists remained in the party. However, what was destroyed were the alliances so painstakingly formed in the previous years, since many fellow-travellers and supporters of the communist movement felt completely disillusioned at the turn of events, for the time being at any rate.<sup>42</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the American Government retaliated and that CPUSA members found themselves the butt of legal proceedings. In January 1940, Earl Browder, for instance, was found guilty of passport fraud, an offence committed years earlier, and was sentenced to four years in prison and fined \$2,000 by the Federal Court in New York (he was granted early release in May 1942). Other party stalwarts were likewise targeted. Communist leaders of the Fur Workers Union were indicted on antitrust charges and an officer of the Communist-led National Maritime Union was arrested for libel. Nor did the trials and tribulations of party members end there.<sup>43</sup> In June 1940, the so-called Smith Act, which was aimed primarily at Communists, was passed. Its provisions decreed that “to intend and to advocate the overthrow of the US government by force and violence” constituted a crime; it established strict alien registration procedures and the deportation of any aliens who were members of groups that adhered to the proscribed code.<sup>44</sup>

The policy and the rhetoric emanating from the CPUSA again changed completely in June 1941, after Nazi Germany attacked the headquarters of international communism – the Soviet Union. What had been an “imperial

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<sup>42</sup> F. M. OTTANELLI, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II*, New Brunswick – NJ 1991, pp. 198–199.

<sup>43</sup> O’NEILL, p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> HOWE – COSER, pp. 400, 417–418.

war” now mutated into the struggle against Fascism. With no further ado, American war preparations were promoted and, just a few months later, US participation in the war itself; funds were raised for food, clothing and medical supplies for the USSR, all strikes were opposed, the opening of a second front in Europe was advocated, and virtually every domestic policy of President Roosevelt was supported.<sup>45</sup> The new course and the successes enjoyed by the Red Army after 1943 naturally had an impact also on the fellow-travellers and progressives. In fact, most Americans appreciated the tremendous sacrifices made by the Soviet people and in many respects Soviet military achievements made up for everything that had been done in the past. Max Lerner, an American journalist and a prominent fellow-traveller, believed for example that the Soviets were able to fight so well only because they had been given a sense of participation in a process of social and economic reconstruction. “*The great reason why the Russian people are fighting as they are is that they are fighting in defence of something they believe they themselves have had a hand in building, and something they believe belongs to them.*”<sup>46</sup> Once again party membership grew substantially. In fact, it doubled between 1941 and 1943 and reached about 80,000 in 1944. The CPUSA managed to recruit heavily among industrial workers. In 1943 alone, party membership in the automotive industry rose by 100%, in shipbuilding by 60%, and in steel by 50%.<sup>47</sup>

Stalin and the conditions prevailing in the Soviet Union were very rarely criticised in this period. Furthermore, some twenty-five movies portraying the USSR in favourable colours were made during the war. The most significant of these was *Mission to Moscow* (1943), based on the book written by Joseph E. Davies, the former American Ambassador in Moscow (1936–1938). Davies depicted the Soviet Union as a progressive society and insisted that those condemned in the Soviet trials were indeed guilty of the crimes they had been accused of. On top of that, changes that took place within the CPUSA

<sup>45</sup> ISSERMAN, pp. 134, 138, 143–144.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in O’NEILL, p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> HOWE – COSER, p. 419.

and the international communist movement itself at this time were also welcomed quite enthusiastically by American progressives, fellow-travellers and other apologists and supporters of communism. In 1943, Stalin dissolved the Comintern and many Americans, and others, believed that national communist parties would now act and function on their own and not simply follow the dictates of Moscow. In like manner, after the Big Three Conference at Teheran, which also took place in 1943, the progressive spirit rose even higher. The normally quite restrained magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*, for example, reported that Americans had returned from the conference “with the impression that Stalin is both a military genius and a man of his word.” The commentators even believed that the previous suspicion of the Soviet Union was the result of Soviet secrecy and they hoped this was now over.<sup>48</sup>

Actually, not only progressives and fellow-travellers were influenced by the mood of confidence that followed the talks in Teheran. The American Communist leader himself was convinced that the Soviet-American alliance that was born during the war begot in turn a whole new character in the international communist movement. Browder believed that Teheran meant that Western democracies had finally agreed to accept the Soviet Union “as a permanent member of the family of nations.” Moreover, he predicted that the Teheran accords would result in Soviet-American harmony and a complete and lasting peace after the war.<sup>49</sup> In this spirit, he wrote *Teheran: Our Path in War and Peace*, a pamphlet that only a year later would result in his own undoing.<sup>50</sup> Browder was also behind the renaming of the CPUSA as the Communist Political Association (CPA), being of the opinion that this would better correspond with American traditions and thus enable party members to function more effectively within the American political system. His proposal was adopted unanimously by the subordinate bodies.

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<sup>48</sup> O’NEILL, pp. 62, 106.

<sup>49</sup> ISSERMAN, pp. 185–186.

<sup>50</sup> E. BROWDER, *Teheran: Our Path in War and Peace*, New York 1944.

## Conclusion

In 1945, after the war had ended, Communists in America were doing quite well all told. Party membership had reached about 75,000 to 85,000; over half of the members were trade unionists and more than half were native-born. Moreover, African American members made up over 10%. They included several professionals who had received training at American elite schools; among whom were Ben Davis, William Patterson, James Jackson and Doxey Wilkerson. The communist newspaper, *Daily Worker*, had a strong readership base. Its Sunday edition had a circulation that topped 65,000 and weekday issues ran between 20,000 and 25,000. In addition, Communists in the United States still retained over a dozen foreign language newspapers that circulated among various immigrant communities.<sup>51</sup> Browder called for the continuation of the wartime line. However, Moscow's leadership in the movement was unpredictable and American Communists were still ready to follow the orders they received.<sup>52</sup> As a result, with the deterioration of international relations and with their clear and open aligning with the Soviet Union in the emerging (or re-emerging?) conflict, once again they lost all the gains they had made. However, that and the revelations of communist spying activities, a story which would rock the nation, would be a whole new article – or two.

American Communists had a vision of a revolution that would transform society and bring about egalitarian socialism. They dreamt of a society where oppression of any sort would not have a place. Their utopian vision was indeed one of messianism and therefore they were ready to make use of every means possible to reach their goals. In so doing, they were both idealistic and ruthless. On top of that, they were ready to accept Moscow's requirements in all matters of life. Yet, not all of the CPUSA members were willing to do that for a longer period of time and, consequently, the turnover in party membership was very high. Nevertheless, one could argue that all of those

<sup>51</sup> KLEHR – HAYNES, pp. 98, 100; KLEHR, *Communist Cadre*, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> D. A. SHANNON, *The Decline of American Communism: A History of the Communist Party of the United States since 1945*, London 1959, pp. 3, 7.



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who believed in or experimented with the communist movement realised that the path to socialism and a just and egalitarian society was not paved with gold.

### **Abstract**

The presented article offers a brief overview of the history of the American communist movement and, consequently, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) between ca 1918 and 1945. It focuses on questions connected to the membership base and racial and ethnic issues. Furthermore, it analyses the link between the CPUSA and the communist headquarters in Moscow. The analysis terminates with the year 1945 as post-world history of the CPUSA represents a different story that is beyond the scope of this text.

### **Keywords**

Communist Party of the United States; Communism; USA; Earl Browder